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Undergraduate

Double Entendre:

A Glimpse into the Meanings of Slave Songs

By Tim Alexander

As seen in history, traditional slave songs also known as “Negro spirituals” have garnered a very significant role in African American culture and society. Historically, the tones and melodies heard in the antebellum south were founded on the metamorphosis of African folklore, polytheism and consistent exposure to Eurocentric-Christianity. The forced cohabitation of both cultures, African and European, produced a painful and yet rhythmic ode to spirituality and escapism. The allegorical duality of various hymns such as *Steal away to Jesus* and *Go down, Moses*, demonstrate the double entendre of lyric and diction as to illicit steadfastness and a sense of escape in the heart of the slave. Therefore, through double meaning and metaphor can said Negro spirituals accurately address the cultural melancholy, optimism, entrapment and escape of this racially marginalized group.

In regards to the aforementioned expression of musicality, many acclaimed Negro spirituals originated from African folklore and religion which is exemplified by the following citation: “The music form of Black Americans parallels the African form, including incremental leading lines with choral iterations”(Charshee 382). Therefore, from rhyme to intonation and melody Negro spirituals paralleled many African songs and customs. One of the most notable characteristics viewed within these songs pertained to the focus on religion as an essential and intrinsic quality linking many African communities. Moreover, many West African ethnic

groups were polytheistic and would often incorporate stories of triumphant gods and demigods as a means of orally passing down knowledge and history. The following quote accurately details the manner in which Africans conveyed history and culture through music- "Africans worship their many gods through songs. The singing accompanies ceremonies and rituals and helps to pass on religious knowledge from one person or group to another"(Charshee 384). In reference to the entwining of African religion and song, ceremonies and rituals were also conducted in the hopes of maintaining tribal unity and emphasizing religious consciousness and faith. Upon arrival to the Americas, Christianity was often utilized by Europeans in order to teach African slaves English and reinforce their inferiority, as a consequence this forced cohabitation led to a mixing of religion- "The African slaves in the Americas fused the spirit of Christianity with their ancestral soul and created the new Black Christianity" (Charshee 385). As can be viewed in the aforementioned quotation, the combination of both familiar and foreign traits of said religions creates a rich amalgamation known as Black Christianity. This new additive to an already robust form of religion highlighted the culture and identity of the slave as well as creating the underpinnings for the foundation of music and the Negro Spiritual.

In regards to the folk spiritual *Go Down, Moses*, which constitutes one of the most well known hymns, it is best seen for its use of allusion and biblical allegory. *Go Down, Moses*, essentially references the old testament of the bible, more specifically Exodus 7:16: "And the Lord spoke unto Moses, go unto Pharaoh, and say unto him, thus saith the Lord, Let my people go, that they may serve me" (Exodus 7:16). Slaves used this story, which recounts the enslavement of thousands of Israelites, as a model for change and freedom. The reference in and of itself alludes to the release and consequent abolition of slavery as an economic construct in Egypt by Moses as commanded by God. As previously mentioned, slaves would take the meaning of this scripture and apply it to their current situations, therefore, the Israelites

represented slaves whereas the Pharaoh and Egypt symbolized the harsh rigidity of the slave master and the south respectively.

When Israel was in Egypt land
Let My people go
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
Let My people go

It was commonplace for slaves, who were completely dehumanized and abused without fail to take on Christianity as an escape, a method of detaching themselves from current oppression. Therefore, in the case of Moses and his famous dictum, “Let my people go” which expresses the need for liberty and freedom, one can see just how impactful these words are and why slaves adopted them.

God, The Lord said,
“Go down, Moses way down in Egypt land
Tell all Pharaohs to let My people go”
Tell all Pharaohs to let My people go

Moreover, the use of repetition as a means of creating a sense of urgency is especially important in that God himself sees slavery as a legitimate problem desperately in need of a solution. This quote, systematically used by slaves serves as rationale against the slave master and the unjust nature of his practices. Although slaves experienced incomprehensible cruelties they remained irrepressible, passionate and vigilant through the resilience of culture and music. Hence, as to reference the duality of metaphor and biblical allusion, slaves succeeded in transforming this Christian song, renovating its meaning, content and altering its musicality for their social gain if only slightly (Curtis 17).

Steal away to Jesus unlike *Go Down, Moses*, indirectly references the escape of slaves to the north. This hymn was much more widely utilized in calling slaves into the woods for secret meetings, warning one another of eminent attacks and commandeering the famous Underground Railroad. Therefore, the use of this song served far more purpose regarding the mobilization of

slaves and the formation of a more concrete identity:

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus
Steal away,
steal away home
I ain't got long to stay here

The double entendre of the following phrase, “steal away to Jesus” is an allusion to the north in which slaves would speak of a better more accepting place that they could “steal away” or escape to in secret. *Steal away to Jesus* was particularly popular because it maintained wholesome Eurocentric Christian beliefs and was never questioned by the slave master. In fact, slaves were often forced to sing this song while not in eyeshot of his or her slaver in the attempts of keeping track of all field workers. On the other hand, slaves would hum and sing this hymn in the hopes of maintaining their devoutness and being rewarded with the passage into heaven. Hence, based on individual as well as collective strengths, slaves were able to gain agency through spirituality and fraternity. It was this form of interpersonal duality between symbols and their contrary and clandestine meanings that really engendered a sense of optimism and anticipation for an autonomous future. Therefore, the duality between both religious and personal attitudes regarding either escaping to the north or heaven makes this spiritual so profound and varied (Curtis 17).

My Lord, He calls me
He calls me by the thunder
The trumpet sounds within-a my soul
I ain't got long to stay here

The sounding of trumpets and thunder as to call upon the slave demonstrates the presence of a higher entity, one that will assure the slave an everlasting afterlife. One of the sole attributes a slave has in these harsh conditions if not property or freedom, is hope and religion to remind himself that life is ephemeral and his suffering is merely temporary. With that being said, it was often commonplace for slaves to utilize their religious teachings as guidance and support

especially in the most difficult of times. This religiosity and steadfastness became inseparable from African American culture even in terms of early antebellum slavery (Hurston 293).

With respect to early slavery up until the precipice of the reconstruction it was difficult to accurately portray the perspective of the slave given that it was against the law for one to read or write. Many perspectives were skewed, inherently racist or one-sided and outlandish. Therefore, one of the leading methods of analysis aside from acclaimed writing from W.E.B Du Bois and the like was to use the slave's influence on black Christianity since only through that concept could his identity develop. By way of observing Negro spirituals, the varying double meanings, and the analysis of metaphor and diction, could one better observe the changes, cultural nuances and sentiments of the slave. This metamorphosis of what it meant to be a slave with little freedom or property but a consistent religious devotion shortly gave way to more in depth study of the slave both ethnically and socially. Hence, African American culture can partly be based on Christianity and how this concept has shaped their development and advancement in an unwaveringly discriminatory society. Musicality as it were, really helped the slave transcend and escape the image of slavery and its cruelties if only briefly. Through the tones and melodies of *Go Down, Moses*, to the intricate chorus of *Steal Away to Jesus*, Negro spirituals as a whole addressed the various stories of the south, and brutality of slavery both melancholic and hopeful.

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Tim Alexander



Tim Alexander is a fifth year Spanish major with an interest in linguistics. One of his main inspirations in writing this piece has been his unfortunate lack of knowledge on the subject. Growing up in a rather culturally homogenized community he found himself at odds with ethnicity, race and how it conflicted with society. He felt as though each essay he wrote had a piece of him, this one in particular being no different as it deals with music, race and slavery. He felt it necessary to explore a sphere of American society not really talked about in class. He had the opportunity of being one of the founding fathers of UC Merced's first two honor societies; National Honor Society in Psychology and National Collegiate Hispanic Honor Society. In his free time he enjoys playing tennis and spending time with friends and family. He hopes to go on to graduate school pursuing a master's degree in Hispanic Linguistics.